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Promoting Interaction through Blogging in Language Classrooms

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the university students' perception on integration of blogging in EFL classes. In this study, the participants were first year university students ($n=103$) who created their group blogs in order to share their blog entries during their oral communication classes. Students interacted with their peers via blogs simply by reading and commenting on each other's blog posts. The data was collected from the blog entries and a questionnaire administered at the end of the project in order to understand the perceptions of students on effectiveness of using blogs in developing their language use. It is hoped that the findings of this study provides some insights into a number of pedagogical and theoretical issues.

Key words: Blogs; Language classes; Oral skills; Writing skills; Interaction

Introduction

The main goal of English language teaching (ELT) is to develop learners' skills to communicate with other people in real world situations and to express themselves in English (Brown, 1987; Oxford, 1990; Yang and Chen, 2007) (quoted in Fageeh 2011, p.1). As Matheson (2004) suggests Web 2.0 technologies, including blogs, are presenting both teachers and learners with new horizons in the field of language teaching and learning and they can easily be adapted for ELT purposes. In more specific cases, a blog is constructed by people sharing mutual interests with a view to collaboratively setting objectives and create a more student-centred learning environment (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Richardson, 2005, quoted in Vurdien 2011, p.2).

Studies on the Use of Blogs as a Tool in Developing Student Interaction

Previous studies have attested to the valuable role played by blogs in enhancing students' language learning skills. In a study on the use of blogging as a platform for ESL learning (Nadzrah Abu Bakar, 2009), the findings indicated the use of blogs encouraged the students to communicate and interact with their peers using different language patterns. According to Pinkman (2005) blogs can provide interesting, authentic and communicative resources that can serve a variety of purposes in language classroom and they can also be used to encourage interaction among students and between teachers and students (Yang, 2009). Liaw, Chen, & Huang (2008), in their study, assessed learners' attitudes towards the web-based system and concluded that students can benefit from group work and learn to formulate ideas and opinions more effectively through group discussions. Yang (2009) also suggests that students have the opportunity to combine their texts, in which they write about their field of interest, with conversations in a very personal and stimulating way while blogging.

Ward (2004) implemented a blog project into his reading and writing class at university level and concluded that blogging provides an alternative way to teach and assess authentic writing and reading skills and also using blogs might increase student interest in their reading and writing. Ward concluded that weblogs can fulfil many of the needs identified for the effective teaching of writing because they are invaluable source of authentic and communicative language in use. Inceçay and Genc (2013) also implemented a blog project into their English Composition course, in which students are required to complete weekly assignments on writing, create a student blog, and write comments on their peers' blogs. They reported blogging can be used as a hands-on activity in the writing classes and it might help students develop metalinguistic awareness.

Moreover, McLeod (2001) put forward that blogs help students explore and assimilate new ideas, create links between the familiar and unfamiliar and also explain things to the self before explaining them to others. Warlick (2007), who studied blogging as a method for developing literacy, highlights that it gives the students opportunity to learn through communication. Some studies also concluded that Weblogs are a powerful tool, particularly for developing reading and writing skills and regular blogging results in more creative writing (Lee,

2010; Noytim, 2010). It emerges that blogs can be used to develop students' writing skills. Additionally, students can benefit from blogs written by native speakers and students' blog interactions with native speakers enhance their intercultural communicative competence (Elola & Oskoz, 2008).

Table 1. Students' responses toward blogging in general

	Valid	Missing	Mean
I like blogging.	103	0	3,75
I feel that blogging is a useful tool for learning English.	103	0	3,74
I am more confident communication in English through blogging than face-to-face communication.	103	0	3,54
I like blogging in English	103	0	3,85
I think blogging has built up my confidence in using the English language.	103	0	3,56
I don't have to worry of what my friends would think of my language when I blog in English.	102	1	3,15
Blogging promotes collaborative learning.	101	2	3,88
I am more confident with my writing ability	102	1	3,84
Blogs help me express my ideas freely.	103	0	3,99
I get more information when reading my friends' posting.	103	0	3,95
I read related articles to support my points in the blogs discussion.	102	1	3,74
Blogging encourages me to read more in English.	101	2	3,69
Reading comments given by my friends help me to think critically on the topic discussed.	102	1	4
I think my reading skills have improved when blogging.	103	0	3,66
I learn how to select information from my readings for the blogs discussion.	103	0	3,73
In general I feel that my English grammar has somewhat improved.	103	0	3,57
I am more active in checking up meaning of difficult words in the dictionary when blogging.	103	0	3,57
My skill in guessing word meanings has improved by blogging.	103	0	3,58
I learn more new words when reading my friends' postings.	101	2	3,57
I am able to give suggestions freely in the blogs discussion.	102	1	3,94
I am able to use the language expressions learnt in the classroom in the blogs discussion.	101	2	3,71
I feel comfortable expressing my opinions in the blog discussions.	103	0	3,96
I learn how to give opinions in the blog discussion.	103	0	4,07
Blogs discussion encourages me to learn English.	102	1	3,58
Blogs discussion improves my discussion skills in English.	102	1	3,9
I think critically on the topic discussed before I post my comments/ideas.	103	0	3,98
I am able to use my critical thinking skills when blogging.	103	0	3,83
I now realize that think skills are important when reading academic articles.	102	1	4,05
I now realize that thinking skills are important when writing.	103	0	4,16
I think it is a good idea to use blogs to practice communication skills in English.	103	0	3,88
Total	103	16	General Mean= 3,78

Method

The aim of the study is to explore students' interpretation on the effectiveness of integrating the use of blogs in developing their communication skills. 103 first year university students who are majoring in English Language Teaching at the Faculty of Education in English-medium university in Turkey. The data for the present study were collected during their first year Oral Communication classes. In this study, the participants created their group blogs and they published their posts every week in order to share their ideas with their peers. The group work project lasted for 8 weeks and students interacted with each other through simply by reading and commenting on each other's blog entries. Further, the participants were engaged in face-to-face discussions on their weekly blog topics during the class hours. In this study, the data were mainly collected by a survey questionnaire (Abu Bakar, Latif and Ya'acob, 2010), consisting of 30 statements, from 1st year students in a university in Ankara. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester. Abu Bakar, Latif and Ya'acob (2010) piloted their questionnaire and they improved their piloted questionnaire based on the students' feedback.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (1=Strongly disagree) to 5 (5=Strongly agree). The questionnaire data collected were analysed using SPSS software. The data was analysed by using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency analysis.

Results and Discussion

In this section, the main findings are reported using categories derived from the related items of the questionnaire. The mean scores for each data are given below. Table 1 illustrates the students' perception on integration of blogging in language teaching. Similar to the earlier studies, blogging was seen to enhance interactive discussion with their peers and promote collaborative learning. Furthermore, most of the students responded in their questionnaires that they were encouraged to use their critical thinking skills while blogging. Engagement in negotiation of meaning among peers and providing views on each other's blogs on several issues might promote students' critical thinking skills.

As illustrated above, most of the students reported that the project enabled them to express their ideas freely and helped them build confidence in using English. The general overview was that they were willing to evaluate, analyse and synthesize the information gathered and publish their blog posts. Blogging was also observed to foster students' critical thinking while reading and providing views on their peers' postings. The findings also confirm that integrating blogs into language teaching has positive effects on students and improves their motivation to use English, as illustrated in Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4.

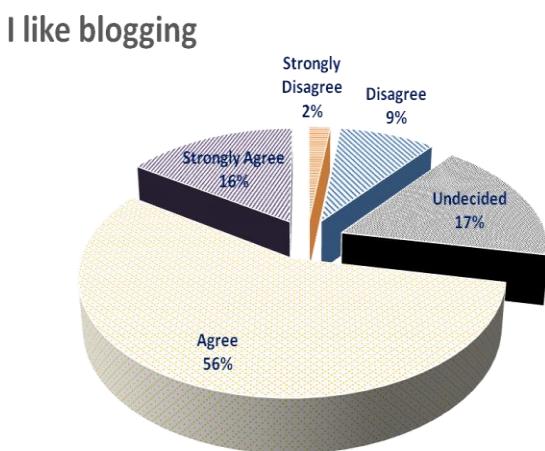


Figure 1 Students' responses to Qt 1

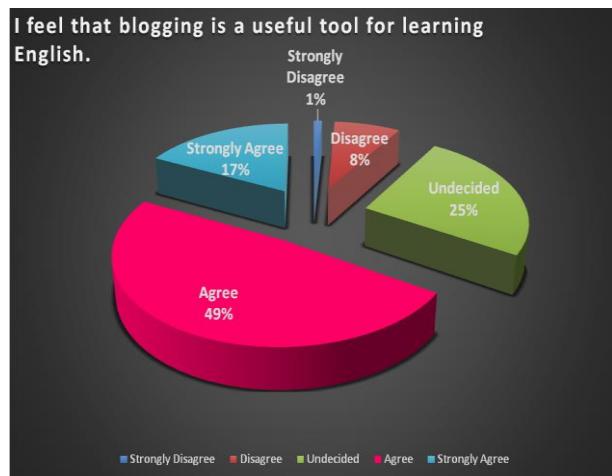


Figure 2 Students' responses to Qt 2

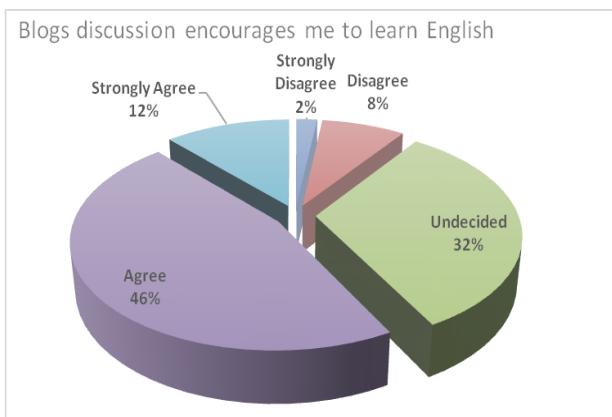


Figure 3 Students' responses to Qt 24

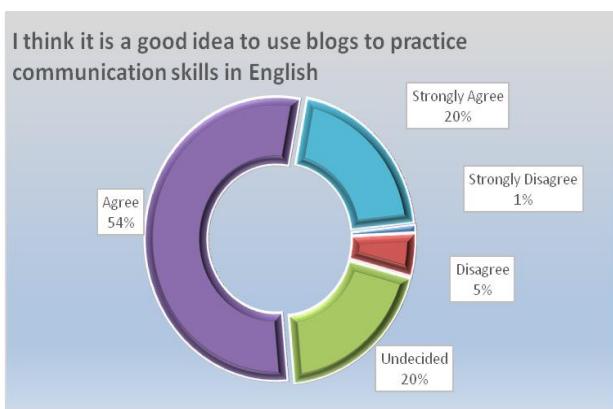


Figure 4 Students' responses to Qt 30

As illustrated above, the students enjoyed using blogs in their oral communication classes and stated that blogs assisted them in interacting with each other more effectively. Table 2 below illustrates the students' perspectives on the effective use of blogs to develop their communication skills. Most of the students responded in their questionnaires that they were encouraged to interact with one another while blogging.

Table 2. Students' perspectives on developing communication skills

I am more confident communication in English through blogging than face-to-face communication.	103	0	3.54
I think blogging has built up my confidence in using the English language.	103	0	3.56
I am more confident with my writing ability	102	1	3.84
Blogs help me express my ideas freely.	103	0	3.99
In general I feel that my English grammar has somewhat improved.	103	0	3.57
I am able to give suggestions freely in the blogs discussion.	102	1	3.94
I am able to use the language expressions learnt in the classroom in the blogs discussion.	101	2	3.71
I feel comfortable expressing my opinions in the blogs discussion.	103	0	3.96
I learn how to give opinions in the blogs discussion.	103	0	4.07
Blogs discussion encourages me to learn English.	102	1	3.58
Blogs discussion improves my discussion skills in English.	102	1	3.9
I think it is a good idea to use blogs to practice communication skills in English.	103	0	3.88

As illustrated above, most of the students reported that the project enabled them express their ideas freely and helped them build confidence in their writing. Although students generally demonstrated positive motivation to interact with their peers, some of the students' concerns need to be discussed further here. Some participants expressed their concerns about posting blog entries in English with their limited foreign language knowledge. Students' surveys in the current study also revealed a similar concern related to the process of peer review. Blogging might intensify some participants' anxiety, as illustrated in Figure 5.

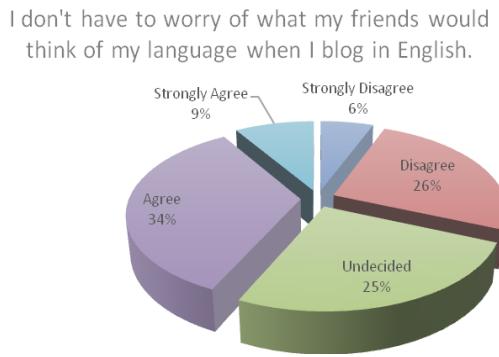


Figure 5 Students' concerns about blogging

Conclusion

This study provided some insight into how the integration of blogs into language learning contexts can contribute to the development of students' communication skills. It emerged that blogs can be useful tools to motivate students by encouraging them to interact with each other and express their ideas freely. The use of blogs in writing process also gave students the opportunity to foster their critical thinking skills by thinking about the content of their blogs and expressing their views on their peers' blog entries. The findings highlighted that blogging gives the students opportunity to learn through communication. As Isisag (2012) suggests, integrating technology, in foreign language teaching will have positive effects on both the teachers and students to help them meet the current demands of the new era. However, it should be considered that some students might be cautious about such practices in the classroom and practices like blogging might increase student anxiety and discourage them from writing regularly. Peer feedback might increase some students' writing anxiety and negatively affect their motivation.

Note

This research study was presented in ICRES 2016.

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